

Woman's best friend

Shepherd mix helps owner do what other mothers do

If you were in the Bellevue Square Nordstrom last Thursday, you might have observed a small woman negotiating the escalator with a very large mix shepherd, followed by a 4-year-old girl with long golden hair.

At the top, the dog would bound ahead so the woman could steady herself using his back while stepping off the moving stairway. If you were still around after young Kayla had acquired a new pair of sneakers in the third-floor children's department, you might have seen the same routine in reverse.

Sure, they could have used the elevator. But Susan Duncan, whose mobility is threatened by multiple sclerosis, pushes new frontiers with her service dog, Joey.

Dogs aren't expected to handle escalators. Nor are they known to do laundry. Joey does both, and many other things.

Duncan calculates that after less than 10 months' training, the dog recognizes 102 verbs and nouns, which she combines into different commands.

Canine workhorse

As she is only 5 feet tall, Duncan can lean on Joey's back for support, enabling her to minimize use of a wheelchair. He pulls her up stairs and braces her going down, helps her up when she falls and lifts her from the swimming pool. He can open and

urged her to take a look at Joey. "He stood on his hind legs, put his paws on my shoulders and looked *down* on me," Duncan recalled. The dog was wild and totally untrained and Duncan wound up on the floor trying to get a leash onto him. But beneath the energy she could perceive a gentle, intelligent animal.

Shaky start

The beginning was not promising. Joey frequently broke loose, streaked out the door, vaulted over the backyard fence or dug under it. "Once as he burrowed out," Duncan said, "I grabbed his tail and hung on, thinking OK, if it breaks, it breaks. Another time he got stuck and Merrin, my 11-year-old, pushed while I pulled to get him out."

But from the start, Joey showed some basic instinct that could serve Duncan well. "When I'd fall, he'd come to help me up," she said.

The turning point came when, to the dismay of some police, Duncan kept Joey at her side to watch Merrin's graduation from the D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) program at school. The show included a police K-9 demonstration, replete with leaping dogs and the firing of blanks.

Throughout the commotion, Joey remained calm. "This was my sign he was going to be OK," said Duncan. "I realized this was a very cool dog."

She took him through obedience training with Larry and Dana Babb at the Humane Society. The Babbs, who have a dog-training business in Renton called Paws-Abilities, encourage people to train their own dogs to be helpers, noting that organizations that breed and train dogs for disabled people have long waiting lists.

"While it helps to love dogs and want a dog, this also can be a learned experience," Dana Babb said. "Not everyone can, like

Susan, read a book and train a dog herself. But with some help, almost anybody who really wants to can do it. And with home training, the dog totally bonds to you, and does what you need done."

Duncan acknowledges dogs aren't for everybody. "They slobber and they shed," she says. "Your housekeeping won't be perfect."

"To train a dog, you need time and patience, and you have to have faith that 'I can do this,' and that 'the dog can do this.' And you have to realize that however a dog is trained, it's never just over, period. You have to stick with the training and reinforce it continually."

Duncan, a registered nurse, feels it's important to educate the public about how dogs can help in dealing with disabilities.

"Joey helps me be independent," she said. "He helps me conserve energy — so I can feel like a human being at the end of the day."



Walking the dog

At home, Duncan takes Joey everywhere. The dog's presence

ing, wondering how long this would go on. I think Joey would eventually have picked up every one if the man hadn't finally intervened to help."

"A man behind us was watching, wondering how long this would go on. I think Joey would eventually have picked up every one if the man hadn't finally intervened to help."

"He and I were alone when I pulled his water dish from my pack and inadvertently let loose a whole package of paper napkins to litter the area. Joey began to pick them up, one at a time, bringing each to me."

"and he always remembered where our van was parked, after I had forgotten."

"Joey went on rides with us, everything but the roller coaster," Duncan recalled. The fierce-looking dog cut a swath through crowds, located the girls when they strayed from Duncan's sight, "and he always remembered where our van was parked, after I had forgotten."

back to me."

After only seven months of training Joey, Duncan was confident enough to take him to Disneyland last summer. Her husband, Tom, stayed home in Bellevue while Duncan drove south with the dog, their two young daughters and a sitter.

After only seven months of training Joey, Duncan was confident enough to take him to Disneyland last summer. Her husband, Tom, stayed home in Bellevue while Duncan drove south with the dog, their two young daughters and a sitter.